Apocalypse Never: Walter Benjamin, the Anthropocene, and the Deferral of the End

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Today there is no shortage of proclamations on the end of days, either in the mode of imminent catastrophe or in the grim acknowledgement that it is already too late to change our fate. It is said that our actions on this planet have inaugurated a new geological epoch—the Anthropocene, the era of humanity—and that this epoch also marks our doom as an era of inevitable catastrophe and extinction. The concept of the Anthropocene carries within it a temporal ambiguity, as it signifies both “that there will not be complete annihilation but a gradual witnessing of a slow end, and that we are already at that moment of witness, living on after the end” (Colebrook 2014). To call this situation apocalyptic or even post-apocalyptic would be a misnomer, because the catastrophe is one without a moment of revelation, much less a redemptive relation to the history that preceded it. The end is embedded in the earth itself, and made into something always already present, as an incontrovertible fact of the human era.

It is the argument of this paper that this vision of an end to human history that is at once finished and unfulfilled is not an innate fact of our ecological predicament, but is rather symptomatic of our present historical juncture of late capitalism—which is itself interminably caught on the verge of global climate catastrophe but seemingly without alternatives. To attribute the ecological disasters of a historically novel economic system to the geological epoch of humanity itself risks reifying that system into something ahistorically innate to human nature, and therefore without changeability or recourse. The narrative of the Anthropocene is thus characterised by a mournful order of time—which shrinks from historical consciousness and envisages humanity as fossils in the making.

To make sense of this melancholic disposition, I will turn to the works of Walter Benjamin to give a typology of the forms of time available to us. Specifically, I will examine Benjamin’s early writings on baroque drama, which stages a model of history in which all human action sinks into the mute eternity of the natural world. This form of time stands in contrast with Benjamin’s more famous formulations of industrial capitalism’s homogeneous, empty time and the messianic time which marks the moment of historical fulfilment. If, as Benjamin claimed, the funereal vision of nature’s eternity is a mark of historical failure, we are today confronted with a failure of world-historic proportions that threatens to sweep up even the most critical minds in its tide.

The subject of Benjamin’s 1925 habilitation thesis is the ‘trauerspiel,’ which may be best defined as an obscure genre of baroque drama originating from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Germany. The trauerspiel has its counterparts elsewhere in Europe, although the most famous of these—Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Calderón’s La vida es sueño—are marked by their transcendence of the trauerspiel form, which in Germany remained an esoteric, even stagnant, genre without a
claim to greatness. The term trauerspiel is variably translated into English as ‘baroque tragedy’ or ‘German tragic drama,’ although both translations risk assimilating the trauerspiel to tragedy proper.

Unlike tragedy in its classical sense, the trauerspiel lacks a historical dimension, in which its heroes attain the immortality of a fulfilled fate. The plot of the tragedy sustains itself on the interplay between fate and character, and the eventual fulfilment of both in the hero’s fulfilment of his destiny. His death is his gateway to greatness, and therefore a paradoxical kind of immortality as the heroic forefather of a city, a culture, or a faith. As Benjamin writes, “in tragedy the hero dies because no one can live in fulfilled time. He dies of immortality. Death is an ironic immortality; that is the origin of tragic irony” (Origin 262). As we shall see, the trauerspiel lacks access to an immortal or historic register because it admits neither a permanence to worldly affairs nor a transcendence from the world of creation.

Yet in its lack of historical consciousness, the trauerspiel is in every respect a reflection of its historical context. Emerging from a Europe ravaged by the wars of religion, culminating in the prolonged bloodshed of the Thirty Years War, the trauerspiel was a narrative form that expressed the hideous violence of the age. For the heroes of the trauerspiel there is no immortality following great deeds, much less any redemption conferred from on high for the victors of the bloody squabbles that take centre stage.

Translated literally, the trauerspiel is a ‘mourning play’ or even a ‘funeral pageant’—terms which better express the melancholic disposition of the genre. It is the prevalence of mourning that informs the trauerspiel’s unique relation to time and history, which it conceives under the symbol of the ruin: a marker of humanity’s passing, where historical triumph is recognised in decay, and nature reasserts itself over the greatest of human achievements. As a measure of decay, the time of the trauerspiel is marked by its transience and the sinking of historical time into the timelessness of non-human nature. “With decay, and with it alone, historical occurrence shrinks and withdraws into the setting” (Benjamin, Origin 190). Its narrative, and the prevailing symbol of the ruin, provide a model for a conception of history that is inevitably fated for decline. The ruin figures the failure of history to achieve any ends beyond inescapable death.

If the trauerspiel occupies a curious position in relation to historical time, this relation is only complicated by its conception of nature and the natural world. As Benjamin writes, “what has the last word in the flight from the world that is characteristic of the Baroque is not the antithesis of history and nature but total secularization of the historical in the state of creation” (Origin 81). This is not an opposition between history and nature, but the total submergence of the former within the latter, silencing historical consciousness in favour of a melancholic rumination upon the cruel whims of nature. Human history is caught within the much wider movement of nature itself, and inevitably cycles downwards from glory to desolation. It is this turn from history to nature that marks the barrier between classical tragedy and the trauerspiel; as Fredric Jameson suggests, “tragedy brings history into being by emerging from legend, by overcoming myth;
Trauerspiel is condemned to a history without transcendence, which it can only think my means of natural categories, cycles, organisms, the seasons, the eternal return” (68). This nature appears “not in the bud and blossom but in the overripeness and decay of its creations. Nature looms before them as eternal transience” (Benjamin, Origin 190). Nature in this sense is not merely the non-human world or the earthly basis for human affairs, but a force external to history which constantly intervenes to dash the dreams of historical permanence.

Although preoccupied with death, the trauerspiel is not an apocalyptic vision of the end of history, because there is no end to speak of. Eternal transience destroys all sense of permanence, but it also precludes any fundamental change to the state of the world. It is in this interminability of natural history that the time of the trauerspiel shows its diabolical face. The eternity of nature’s dominion is experienced as the endless torment of perdition. In the trauerspiel's bloody dramas the most boastful of nature's creations are the most overripe, and the most accomplished are the ones most ready for decay. Something abyssal is recognised at the heart of humanity, god’s fallen children who cannot be anything but the imperfect mirrors of a creation lacking all transcendence. The subsumption of history within nature begets a theory of human nature: a bloody turmoil, a lust for power, and a war of all against all. History does not end, because it can come to no lasting conclusion; it eddies in the vastness of nature but does not entirely subside. “History finds expression not as [a] process of an eternal life but as [a] process of incessant decline” (Benjamin, Origin 188). The narrative of the trauerspiel realises a melancholy negation of historical consciousness, which retains the historical interest in disputes of power while simultaneously undercutting the last achievements of those historic struggles.

But where does this damned, earthly time of the mourning play find its expression today? If this melancholy resignation to the vicissitudes of nature came to the fore of German drama during the social crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I argue that similar attitudes toward history and formulations of time are also near at hand for many who today see climate change as the augur of a new, posthuman age. As we have seen, the time of the trauerspiel has four key traits: (1) It is, first and foremost, a time which is historically unfulfilled: a litany of lost causes; (2) it is a spectral time in which history is understood under the symbol of the ruin; (3) it naturalises eternal transience as the order of the world at large; (4) its drama is one of earthly creation without hope of messianic redemption. Now it remains to be shown that the grand narrative of the Anthropocene possesses parallel traits to those of the trauerspiel narrative, allowing it to be understand as both an anti-historical narrative of naturalised decline and as a symptom of the world-shattering catastrophe that it purports to describe.

As in the narrative of the trauerspiel, the concept of the Anthropocene carries with it a sense of time that twists back on itself, projecting its catastrophic epoch back to the primordial origins of humanity and far into a post-human future. As Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro write, although the Anthropocene is an epoch “in the geological sense of the word,” it also “points toward the end of epochality as such, insofar as our species is concerned.” Danowski and Viveiros de Castro continue:
It is certain that, although it began with us, it will end without us: the Anthropocene will only give way to a new geological epoch long after we have disappeared from the face of the Earth. [It is] a present ‘without a view,’ a passive present, the inert bearer of a geophysical karma which it is entirely beyond our reach to cancel. (5)

The Anthropocene, from this perspective, is not only a description of a new era, but an injunction to think of the present time with resignation. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro’s invocation of ‘karma’ is no anomaly. Among the proclamations upon the changed circumstances of history, there is no shortage of statements on the moral meaning of those changes. The discovery that we have entered not only a new era of history but a new geological epoch has brought with it a chiliastic fervour, spoken in, for example, Roy Scranton’s manifesto for Learning to Die in the Anthropocene and Patricia MacCormack’s argument in The Ahuman Manifesto that human extinction may well be the only solution to climate change.

It is little wonder that the trauerspiel has not gone unnoticed by some theorists of the Anthropocene. As the editors of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt’s Anthropocene Project write, “the Trauerspiel plays on in the Anthropocene, for ‘the catastrophe here is in the form of the age itself, meaning our entire civilization, and its requisite way of life, is already a ruin’” (Klingan et al. 34). The Anthropocene is rendered as a trauerspiel drama for the entire globe:

A return to the earthly conditions of man, the name of a fated history, the passing away of Renaissance humanism, humans above all, for a general ideology of the creaturely, an immanent intermingling between rocks, trees, angels, and tyrants. (Klingan et al. 29-30)

A rosy picture, but one we will not be fated to see with our own eyes. What at first sounds like an eschatological vision of paradise returned to earth belies the infernal heart of the trauerspiel. In its shock at the unrepresentable catastrophe that lies before it, the trauerspiel finds solace in a catastrophic conception of nature itself. In the eternal stretch of natural time, we are already dead; a fate we must contemplate in melancholic resignation. In Anthropocene theory, too, there is a recognition of shock, a desperate need to make sense of a world that no longer conforms to the myth of progress—and the answer these theorists provide is a new, earthly myth. At precisely the moment that the planetary reign of Anthropos is declared it is disavowed, and the eternal transience of nature’s dominion is reaffirmed.

If the Anthropocene contradicts the narrative of historical progress by naturalising decline in the place of ascent, this is not to say that it has no relation to the mechanical time that Benjamin identifies as the source of progressive modernity in his 1940 “Theses.” In fact, the time of the Anthropocene depends just as much upon a homogeneous, empty construction of time as does the myth of progress. But whereas the universal history of progress sees a timeline stretching indefinitely upward into the heavens, the Anthropocene envisages a timeline that infinitely curves back upon itself across millennia. As Claire Colebrook writes, conceptualising the Anthropocene means envisaging a world without us which is already present, virtually, at this moment:
The positing of an anthropocene era (or the idea that the human species will have marked the planet to such a degree that we will be discernible as a geological strata) deploys the idea of human imaging—the way we have already read an inhuman past in the earth's layers—but does this by imagining a world in which humans will be extinct. (28)

This construction of time is no less uniform than its progressive counterpart, but whereas the latter takes the clock as its model the Anthropocene measures itself on a cosmic scale. In the place of the seconds, minutes, and hours of the clockface, the Anthropocene's homogeneous, empty units are geological layers—trace remnants that we imagine ourselves as in advance. Chronological time is distended across an inhuman expanse of time, projecting forward a future in which we must necessarily meet our demise—a future that is then brought back to the present as the lesson that our fates are already sealed: *sic transit gloria mundi*. Just as mechanical time and its universal history of progress work to negate true historical consciousness by turning our gaze from the sacrificed dead to an imagined future paradise, so too does this vision beget an ahistorical image of eternity: which seals up the past and future alike in forgotten aeons.

In its retreat from historical time, the concept of the Anthropocene is opened to a mythic sensibility, which discovers in the inhuman void of extinction a hard-faced divinity staring back. Isabelle Stengers has made much of James Lovelock's 'Gaia hypothesis,' taking seriously the theory's personification of an impersonal planetary system. For Stengers, Gaia is a strange kind of god, who announces the end of days but does not preside over the casting of judgment or distribution of redemption:

> Gaia is the name of an unprecedented or forgotten form of transcendence: a transcendence deprived of the noble qualities that would allow it to be invoked as an arbiter, guarantor, or resource; a ticklish assemblage of forces that are indifferent to our reasons and our projects. (47)

Mirroring the demiurgic divinity of the trauerspiel, this is a 'transcendence' that does not, in fact, transcend, but remains mired within the world it governs without recourse to a world beyond. This curiously non-transcendent divinity also finds its spokesperson in Bruno Latour, in his lectures on natural theology, who proclaims the coming rule of Gaia over a terrestrial world of “immanence freed from immanentization” (212). Whereas for Stengers the inauguration of a new mythology for the era of climate change stops short of a definite political project, for Latour the intrusion of Gaia means a return to the *bellum omnium contra omnes* of Hobbes, the ‘earthly’ politics of Carl Schmitt (149-50), and the repudiation of the modern world proclaimed by Eric Voegelin (242-5). For this mystified faction of Gaia, the world as we know it is damned, and all that remains to be done is to make a choice of future barbarisms. An apocalypse is proclaimed, but redemption is postponed, as myth reasserts itself over a humanity with neither a history nor a future.

Even apart from these more explicit attempts to formulate a mythology for the era of ecocide, the Anthropocene has been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny for its ahistorical qualities. One
cogent expression of this critique has been given by Andreas Malm, who writes that the main paradox of the Anthropocene narrative is that, within it "climate change is denaturalised in one moment—relocated from the sphere of natural causes to that of human activities—only to be renaturalised in the next, when derived from an innate human trait. Not nature, but human nature—this is the Anthropocene displacement" (270). For Malm, the core problematic of the Anthropocene is a sleight of hand, which displaces the culpability of industrial capitalist society onto a wider complicity of 'human nature,' presumably including the masses of humans today and in the past who did little to fuel the climate crisis. Seen through the lens of the trauerspiel and Benjamin's typology of temporal forms, we can see how this act of legerdemain extends into the heart of the Anthropocene concept. As the proclamation of the first human epoch, the Anthropocene naturalises the present state of humanity and its crises as symptoms of human nature specifically and nature itself in general.

Against this naturalisation of history it is necessary to historicise nature; to understand the recursive, or dare we say dialectical, feedback loop between history and nature, and the way in which both are composed in a mutually dependent natural history. The merely natural processes of the world—from weather, to digestion and respiration, to the architecture and fashion we take for granted as part of our living environment—are, Benjamin insists, only those things of which we remain unconscious, allowing them to slip into the subterranean zones of dream and myth. To the dreaming collective, these phenomena “stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon them in politics and history emerges” (Benjamin, Arcades 390). This is the meaning of historicised nature: the emergence of unconscious forces into the light of day, transforming their motions from the vicissitudes of chance or fate into the known causes of a totality in which nature and history are inextricably linked. The failure to recognise the historical component of this system is to lose this foothold, and to conceive of nature as an unconscious and seemingly inalterable force that slowly engulfs history in its myths.

As in the trauerspiel narrative, we find in Anthropocene theory a recognition of historical crisis that precludes a consciousness of history itself. Rather, crisis is naturalised and made the founding myth for a melancholic model of history. According to this narrative, we are the doomed creatures of a monstrous world, residing in the ruins of a geological epoch that will stretch far beyond the life of our species. But even though extinction is at hand, the end is nowhere in sight as we drift further into an anti-apocalypse; an event that mutes revelation and casts its transient shroud across our collective horizons. That is, until we can grasp the historical as well as the natural genesis of the present conjuncture—to understand that the present epoch is not the consequence of an eternal order but the work of human hands; hands that, if conscious of the work they do, can just as well halt what they set in motion.
SYMPOSIUM: LIVING IN THE END TIMES
Walter Benjamin and the Anthropocene

Works Cited


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